Privacy & Publicity: Reunion in the electric field?

A recent episode of the popular Netflix miniseries *The Crown* featured the Windsor household *en famille* gathered around a grainy TV set watching a first-time BBC documentary on a day in the life of the royal family. This exercise of the royals watching themselves watching a show was far from perfunctory. The various members in attendance were thoroughly engaged and readily offered up a number of observations both on the show and on themselves. In passing it should be noted that this form of participating in your own audience participation is one of the joys of life, simultaneously flitting between being yourself and being your audience. Presumably it is something we are happy to do whenever we can, be it casting a vote and watching the returns on TV, re-visiting a photo album, seeing if we made a shortlist, checking feedback on a talk, playing charades, etc. The play of emotions between ourselves and everybody else is totally engaging. Long a staple of theatre and music hall, this moment of contrived duality is probably more available in our current media mix than anything our ancestors were able to come up with. The fun seems to reside in the gap between what we might want to think of ourselves and what others in fact do. The idea is not to ignore this gap or patch it over, but to stay with it as a source of ferment generating new and fresh perception. Which is to say, it has the same goal as all genuine art.

Another point of interest in *The Crown* which could be entitled *The (Re-)Education of a Royal Family* is the Windsor's almost uniform resistance to the whole idea of being on TV -- at least as their ordinary selves and not as larger-than-life princes and princesses. Already the most public family in the land, why would they object to being stars in a bigger show? Surely this is what everybody wants? Well, it turns out, not exactly. However obvious, the brighter media spotlight is no way to fathom the royal reluctance to get into the electric age. A far more promising approach might be the *education* subplot of *The Crown*, now into some 40 episodes. Its theme could well be the end of the old star system as done in by the need for personal participation.

So far as monarchy is concerned, the old order was all about scale and hierarchy and how this plays into the identity of everybody. Its apotheosis may well have been reached with Queen Victoria whose august public persona was totally out of whack with her close-to-neurotic everyday personality.

The old star system was all about size and visibility, features that are given and routine in an electric field

The reason Elizabeth et al. have had so much trouble with the changes ushered in by the BBC has to do with the kind of access that instant reporting requires -- one that craves personal contact and being in touch. In its day the British Empire was the biggest show around, and the family heading this small sea-faring *nation / world empire* was at the centre of everything. But for all its dominance this great network had its limits. Despite global heft and leverage, it was totally unprepared for, and upended by, communication speeds that make nonsense of its most basic time and space assumptions.

Back in the days of empire, anything relating to the monarch's private life didn't matter that much so long as their public face remained constant and impartial. With TV and instant feedback, everything that was once separate and distant simply dissolves into a closeup. The once self-sufficient spheres of public and private get hopelessly intertwined. On-air, a person or event exists in virtual time, which is to say they come alive in the moment of experiencing and take on dimensions that make no sense under the old rules. Not only is such a virtual effect potentially everywhere, it is recallable any time by the push of a button. In a flash the old reliable goals of place and position lose their aura, becoming rigid and puny in a news cycle overflowing with drama and human interest. In the new simultaneity, the once undisputed magnetism of the centre undergoes a change in polarity. In a flash its retainers come across as out-of-it and more or less deficient as human beings.

If anybody might be inclined to hold a grievance against the world of electric communications, it should be the house of Windsor. Not only have members been forced into unseemly relationships with once-distant admirers but they have suffered a drastic loss of face. All of which has to do with morphing from splendid isolation to staying alive in the 24-7 newsworld. Still it is not as if they had much choice. To explore the communications dynamic underlying the reversal they have suffered is perhaps the best best way of dealing with the various workarounds everybody has been forced into. The royals are not alone in having their *noblesse oblige* upended, just the most spectacular example of the upset that has been visited upon one and all by instant connectivity.

The lesson of TV: a toss-up between '*everything is local'* and '*you must be be laid-back'*

The nearness and involvement demanded by today's make-a-difference reporting is not simply a matter of sticking camera and microphone into the middle of the action for additional nuance and detail. A basic characteristic of all attention is that any sensory input can (must?) be

sacrificed when it comes to generating overall coherence. In the act of going in-depth (via taping or recording) it quickly becomes evident that no one story-line or angle has preference in making sense of a moving or unfolding situation. When things get kinesthetic, single-mindedness is no advantage and in fact can cripple a serious-minded witness. This is as much as to say that objectivity -- the ability to compare in depth with some finalty -- gets more and more unsettled as things get stickier. It is at this point that our critical faculties spontaneously adapt to movement and complexity by changing gears and reverting to a much older way of making sense, a quick and casual down-shifting having to do with *picking up* and *catching on* that is very different from the old *evaluating*. It is at this moment that the iconic image steps in for the verifiable conclusion. This is the kind of attention that TV defaults to all the time without being aware of it.

To understand the default mode of TV, it is helpful to see it as a sort of **attention efficiency ordering** that has little to do with logic, but is indispensable for cutting through the fog and getting to the bottom of things. A case in point may be the usual perception we bring to bear on public figures in our lives these days, a quasi-instinctive *framing* that has little to do with objectivity. Affectively we may seek to be in their company, to reject their company, or to be indifferent, but no matter what, it is a largely personal response, not that different from the way we deal with friends and acquaintances. No training required. Our current on-line existence features many such relationships. Based on photo, video clip, audio tape, journalistic comment, we are full of *impressions* or *takes* that are unformed, impossibly diffuse and contradictory, but -- and this is the important point -- stick like a burr. The proper term for such a vague yet compelling impression is *image* or more specifically, *iconic image.* Under conditions of electricity and non-stop data, the intriguing archetype replaces the old cliché. Immediately and totally. The polar opposite of an idea that can be spelled out and defined, the iconic image is hyped up endlessly by the ad-men nowadays as something beyond price, whereas in fact it is a dramatic effect that should be studied carefully. Otherwise it remains a first impression that never dissipates.

The old role of the royals was to be in the right place at the right time and to say all the right things. Their new role in the media bubble is to engage dramatically and to bless.

The Windsors are not alone in worrying about loss of privacy and meaning. In the presence of ever available "inside" information, it quickly becomes obvious that the duties of an old-style monarch do not constitute a viable use of one's human faculties. Given that once-obvious boundaries have been totally breached, today's royals find themselves in a situation about which they have been badly misinformed, and for which they are unprepared. The challenge for them is to offload habits and expectations forged over centuries in order to come up with a way of holding themselves together that works in virtual time. Curiously, the identity they so desperately reach out for is not that different from the with-it kind of presence so avidly sought after by entertainer, teacher, politician, advertiser and businessman alike these days. It is no longer a matter of occupying a position or executing a single function as such tasks are far too simplistic. Rather it is to come up with a role that continues to make sense and to satisfy under

ever-changing virtual conditions. No longer preoccupied with correctness, the new job (of everybody) is to be dramatic and engaging. This means creating (and starring in) their own unique show and then sharing it with their audience.

In a with-it world, the old role of representation has given way to that of participation. This might not sound like much but is substantive. In an old style bureaucracy, the function of an agent or representative is carefully defined and surrounded with checks and balances. It is a way of ranking and delegating that is nothing if not exclusive. But when data is zipped around at the speed of light, inclusion replaces exclusion. It is not even a contest. In a virtual field where nothing is fixed in time or place, the bureaucratic impulse to quantify and categorize stands out like a dinosaur. To the degree it seeks to impose its *assumptions* of solidity and firmness, it reveals itself to be irrelevant and useless.

In a buzzing communications sphere, growing up is a production or realization that is at once both private and public

Under electric pressure nothing stays in place but continually acts and is acted upon by everything else. In a charged field, what has been discussed as a social identity or role has internal and external features very much at play with each other. As self-determining, human identity is ever seeking fullness and completion. As pushed and pulled and coloured by the field the same individual is opaque to any outside parameter. We create and transform ourselves while being created and transformed by our anything-goes context. Growth and maturation in our present day is unlike anything even dreamt about before we were touched by electricity. The old idea of personal growth as a gradual transition from the state of privacy to the state of publicity is an albatross. You cannot compare simultaneity and step-at-a-time.

Once it is understood that both physical separation and sequential connection are archaic forms which are not viable under electric conditions, it can be seen that the precipitous decline of personal privacy and public consensus that is upon us is not a tragedy to be mourned but an opportunity to be met. Like any scientific claim conditioned by physical and temporal variables, the old privacy and the old common good are not meant to be absolute. Because their assumptions evaporate under electric pressure, they are in no way sacred, but take on the aspect of very different challenges to be faced. But before anybody can take on the uncertainties of the on-air with any degree of confidence, it is necessary to diagnose the ground we no longer walk on but swim in. This is where the action is nowadays -- exploring and establishing the boundaries of our virtual environment.